



Old English

The making of English is the story of three invasions
and a cultural revolution.

—ROBERT MACNEIL, *The Story of English*

Outer History

ENGLAND BEFORE THE ENGLISH

The land mass now called England has been continuously inhabited since Paleolithic (a prehistoric era distinguished by the development of stone tools) times, when the glaciers of the last Ice Age had so lowered the sea level that England was attached to the continent of Europe. We have no knowledge of the languages spoken by the Paleolithic and Neolithic inhabitants of Britain, apart from the fact that they were almost certainly non-Indo-European. The first Indo-European speakers to arrive were probably the Celts. The date of their arrival is a subject of much controversy; suffice it to say that Celtic speakers were in the British Isles several centuries before the birth of Christ.

Beginning in 55 B.C., Julius Caesar made several attempts to invade Britain but met such fierce resistance from the local population that Rome left Britain alone for the next century. Then in A.D. 43, the Emperor Claudius sent a huge army to the island and, by about A.D. 50, had subjugated most of what is today England. The northern part of Britain escaped Roman domination and remained unconquered.

For the next four hundred years, England was Rome's westernmost outpost and was gradually but thoroughly Romanized. The Romans established cities and built a network of highways. They erected Roman-style houses and villas, complete with central heating, running water, and mosaic tile floors. There were

On Your Feet

We know more about Anglo-Saxon jewelry than about other articles of dress because jewelry, usually made of metal, is more likely than cloth or leather to survive being buried for centuries in damp English soil. Still, the Old English language gives us many clues about other items or clothing. For footwear alone, Old English had a number of words. The most common and most general term was *scoh*, the ancestor of our word *shoe*. A *stæppe-scoh* was a slipper, as was a *swiftlere*. Rawhide footwear was called *hemming* or *rifeling*. As the word suggests, *leperhose* were leather boots or gaiters. Monks might wear a *calc*, a sandal; the word is an early borrowing from Latin. A softer foot-covering was the *socc* (PDE *sock*).



And, just like people today, the early English apparently sometimes suffered from uncomfortable shoes. There is a Middle English proverb, *Tel þou neuer þy fo þat þey fot akeþ*, that is, "Never tell your foe that your foot hurts." The accompanying drawings are of Anglo-Viking footwear found in York, England, and dating from the seventh to ninth centuries A.D.

SOURCE: Adapted from information in Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1986).

Roman public baths and even theaters. Naturally, military bases and forts were set up. In the north, defensive walls were built to discourage raids by the un-Romanized Picts (natives who probably spoke a Celtic language). When the Empire adopted Christianity as its official religion, England too was Christianized. The official language was Latin, though the native Britons continued to speak their Celtic dialects.

By the beginning of the fifth century A.D., Rome itself was under such pressure from migrations and invasions from the east and north that the Roman legions were withdrawn from Britain to defend the borders closer to Rome; the traditional date of their departure from Britain is A.D. 410.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE ENGLISH

Once the Romans had left, the political situation in Britain deteriorated rapidly. Softened by their dependence on the Roman legions, the Romanized Britons were ill-equipped to defend themselves from renewed attacks by the Picts.

Then, even as the Britons were trying to cope with their fiercer northern neighbors, a much more calamitous series of events took place: waves of Germanic-speaking people from the Continent (Europe) began to invade the island. The “English” were coming to England.

Although the traditional date for the first Germanic invasions is A.D. 449, at least some Germanic immigrants had arrived earlier, and certainly many more continued to come after 449. Historical records for the period are almost nonexistent, and our knowledge of events in England at the time must depend as much on archaeology and inference as on written evidence.

The most comprehensive description of the Germanic invasions was written by the Venerable Bede, who was writing two and a half centuries after the event. Bede says that the invaders were Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. He reports that the Angles came from eastern Schleswig and settled in what is now Suffolk, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Humberside, and northern Yorkshire. The Saxons came from the north German coast between the Elbe and Weser rivers and occupied Essex, Sussex, and northern Hampshire. The Jutes, according to Bede, originated in southern Denmark and settled in Kent, the Isle of Wight, and the nearby coast of southern Hampshire (See Figure 5.1.) Bede’s description, however, is suspiciously tidy, implying a level of planning and organization among the groups of invaders that surely never existed. Probably the immigrants were of

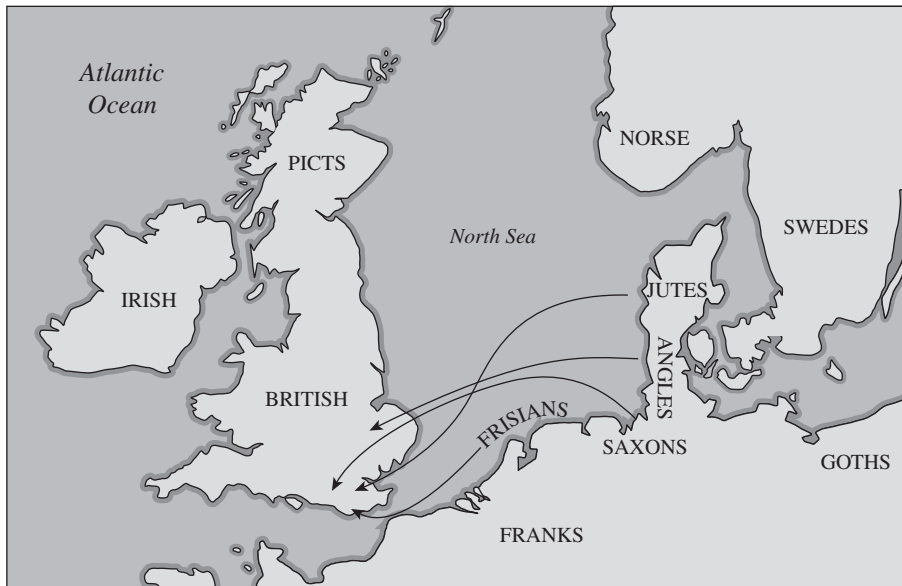


FIGURE 5.1 The Continental Origins of the Anglo-Saxons (5th C. AD).

The map shows tribal rather than national names because northern Europe was not yet divided into political states with central governments. The map “collapses” migrations that occurred over half a century or more; the Jutes and the Frisians started arriving before the Angles and the Saxons did. Arrows show the general areas in which the various tribes tended to settle. The invaders later spread inland and to the north.

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mixed origins and continued to intermingle long after they arrived. Further, it is highly likely that, in addition to Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, there were Frisians from the general area of Zuyder Zee.

Whatever the original tribal associations of the invaders, the Celts called them “Saxons.” However, they were called Angles on the Continent almost from the beginning, their common language was called English, and the Angles of course eventually gave their name to the entire country.

Germanic immigrants continued to pour into England for the rest of the fifth century, and those already there continued to push inland, following the rivers up from the sea, and further invading Celtic territory. Had the Britons (Celts) been able to maintain Roman organization and discipline, they would have easily been able to repel the invaders, at least in the beginning. The Britons, however, constantly squabbled among themselves and, as a result, were steadily forced back toward the west, southwest, and north of the island. At the beginning of the sixth century, the Britons did manage to unite briefly under the leadership of King Arthur (who was probably not a king at all but rather a general of Romano-British background). They won a great victory around A.D. 500 at Mt. Badon, perhaps located near Bath. Anglo-Saxon military activity and the flood of immigrants halted for the next half century, and some of the Anglo-Saxons even returned to the Continent. The halt was only temporary, however, and, by the middle of the sixth century, Anglo-Saxon pressure on the Britons was again in full force.

Once in control of the best parts of the island, the Anglo-Saxons continued to indulge their warfaring habits by fighting among themselves. Traditionally, there were seven major kingdoms, collectively termed the Heptarchy: (1) Northumberland, extending from southeast Scotland down to the Humber River; (2) East Anglia, including present-day Norfolk and Suffolk; (3) Mercia, including the rest of central England over to Wales; (4) Essex; (5) Kent; (6) Sussex; and (7) Wessex in the southwest over into Devon. (See Figure 5.2.) This neat division is, however, too simplistic: borders shifted with the rise or decline of petty kings, and there were several minor kingdoms about which little is known. In general, the locus of major power shifted steadily southward during the Anglo-Saxon period. Northumbria dominated in the seventh century, Mercia in the eighth, and Wessex in the ninth and tenth.

By the sixth century, Roman Britain lay in ruins. Public works like roads, bridges, and baths were neglected. Cities and towns decayed and then apparently were abandoned. Peasants, the bulk of the population, clustered in tiny villages surrounded by their fields. At least some Anglo-Saxon kings, on the other hand, managed to amass great wealth and power, as is evidenced by the magnificent seventh century burial site of an East Anglian king (probably Rædwald) at Sutton Hoo. See Figure 5.3.

THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF ENGLAND

During the disorder that followed the withdrawal of the Roman legions and the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, Christianity had died out among the Britons. The only religion of the Anglo-Saxons themselves was Germanic paganism. In



FIGURE 5.2 England during the Old English Period.

England during the Old English period (449–1066) consisted of areas of influence, petty kingdoms that rose and fell with the fortunes of their leaders. Although the term Heptarchy implies seven such kingdoms, the actual number varied widely, and some important kingdoms are not included in the traditional Heptarchy; among these are Bernicia, Deira, Lindsey, Middle Anglia, and the Hwicce. On the map, the names of the members of the Heptarchy are in boldface type. The areas that have given their names to major Old English dialect areas are in italic boldface type.

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A.D. 597, Pope Gregory sent a mission under St. Augustine (not to be confused with the earlier St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo and author of *City of God*) to Kent. Conversion was relatively swift, although backsliding took place occasionally during the early years, and pagan customs and beliefs survived for centuries under the veneer of Christianity. For example, the English names for four of the days of the week are still those of the Germanic divinities Tiw, Wodan, Thor, and Frig; and even the most sacred of Christian holidays, the paschal festival, is named for the Germanic goddess Eastre.



FIGURE 5.3 Sutton Hoo is a burial site excavated in 1939 that contains numerous Anglo-Saxon artifacts including a burial boat, jewelry, utensils, and war gear, which can now be seen at the British Museum.

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Even as Augustine's mission was proselytizing in southern England, northern England was being converted by missionaries from Ireland. At the time, the Irish church was organized somewhat differently from the Roman church, and over the years of isolation from Rome, the Irish had failed to keep up with changes emanating from Rome, primarily minor points such as the calculation of Easter, appropriate clerical tonsure, and the like. The two branches had no major doctrinal discrepancies, and, for England, their differences were resolved amicably in favor of Rome at a synod held in Whitby in 664.

Christianization is a landmark in the history of the English language because it brought England and the English speakers into the only living intellectual community of Europe, that of the Latin Church. England immediately adopted the Latin alphabet, and English was soon being written down extensively. New loanwords from Latin began to appear in English. During the seventh and eighth centuries, the level of Latin scholarship was so high in England that English scholars were in demand on the Continent. Alcuin of York became director of Charlemagne's Palace School.

The Anglo-Saxon church and, consequently, Anglo-Saxon culture declined sharply with the Viking invasions. The Vikings were pagan and had no compunctions about robbing English monasteries, burning books, and killing, enslaving, or dispersing monks. After the Treaty of Wedmore (A.D. 878), King Alfred was able to achieve some revival of intellectual life, but the major rebirth of learning after the Danish invasions did not come until the reign of his grandson

Edgar. In the second half of the tenth century, inspired and supported by the ongoing Benedictine Reform on the Continent, three English churchmen—Dunstan (Archbishop of Canterbury), Ethelwold (Bishop of Winchester), and Oswald (Bishop of Worcester and Archbishop of York)—reformed monastic rules, brought in better-educated clergy, had new churches built, established schools, and encouraged the copying of both English and Latin manuscripts.

THE VIKING INVASIONS AND THEIR AFTERMATH

While the English—for they can be termed such by now—were still fighting among themselves, the island was subjected to a new wave of Germanic invaders. These were the Vikings, the terror of all Europe and even the Mediterranean. Their first attack on Europe was in 787, when a contingent of Danish Vikings landed in Dorsetshire. In 793, the Vikings (or Danes, as the English called them) sacked the wealthy Lindisfarne Priory off the Northumberland coast. England's weak defenses and rich monasteries made it a tempting target for the Danes, who continued to plague the English for another century and came close to taking the country over entirely. Early raids were primarily hit-and-run, but the Danes soon realized that England was a valuable piece of real estate and began settling in previously terrorized and conquered areas.

In 865, a huge Viking army landed in East Anglia, and within five years the Danes controlled most of northeast England and were moving toward Wessex. At last, the ruler of Wessex, King Alfred, managed to beat the Danes soundly at Ashdown in 871 and again at Edington in 878. Under the terms of the subsequent Treaty of Wedmore, Guthrum, the Danish leader, was forced to accept Christianity and to retreat to the Danelaw (see Figure 5.4), a section of northeast England that the English agreed to recognize as Danish territory in return for a cessation of the incursions into other parts of the island.

King Alfred, certainly among the greatest kings England has ever had, not only held the Danes at bay but also fortified towns and built the first English navy. Furthermore, his talents extended beyond the military. Disturbed by the decline in learning caused by the Viking attacks on monasteries (the only real centers of intellectual activity), Alfred had important Latin texts translated into English, arranged for the compilation of other texts, founded schools, and instituted the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a log of important events that was kept continuously in some areas of England until well after the Norman Conquest. Fortunately for England, Alfred had competent heirs. His son Edward the Elder was king of Wessex and his daughter Æthelflæd ruled Mercia after her husband died; they kept Danish power in check and further unified the country.

In the early eleventh century, renewed Norse invasions produced more turmoil and ended with the Danish king Cnut on the English throne (1016). Cnut's sons, less able than he, so misgoverned England that power returned to Alfred's line in 1042 in the person of Edward the Confessor. Edward died without a direct heir in 1066. Of the several claimants to the throne, the most important were (a) Edward's brother-in-law Harold Godwinson, whom a group of English lords selected as king; (b) Harold Haardraade, king of Norway; and



FIGURE 5.4 The Danelaw was a section of northeast England that the English agreed to recognize as Danish territory in return for a cessation of the incursion into other parts of the island. The southern limit of the Danelaw was the Roman road known as Watling Street, which ran from London north to Wales.

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(c) William, Duke of Normandy, who insisted that Edward had promised him the throne. In 1066, Harold Haardraade landed a huge fleet in Yorkshire; he was killed at Stamford Bridge and Harold Godwinson routed his troops. Two days later, Duke William sailed from Normandy with a large army bound for Essex. Harold Godwinson force-marched his troops 190 miles south to meet William, and the two armies met near Hastings in East Sussex. William had the great advantages of fresh troops and cavalry (Harold had only infantry). After Harold was killed by an arrow through his eye, William won the battle and eventually all of England.

Inner history

In the following discussions of Old English, a late variety of West Saxon is used as a model for all of Old English. This practice is misleading because, first, “classical” West Saxon represents a late stage of Old English, and second, it